

Ordinary Human Unhappiness

¹
most likely in the middle of the 2010 Fall semester.

²
“That is the *nature* of the *work!!*” is how Prof. Jan Kubasiewicz puts it.

³
Quoted in Lawrence Weschler’s *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. pg. 42.

⁴
Ibid.

At some point¹ during my Dynamic Media Institute peregrinations, it became clear that I needed to at least attempt to have an exhibition of my work. Everything that I was doing involved installation as its form, and installation is meant to be experienced in person². You can make cool little videos of installations, and you can take photographs, but they never capture what it’s like to experience the work in person. They can’t. And then the questions that people ask me about the videos or the work end up being the kinds of things that either aren’t really answerable, or questions for which the best answer is, inevitably, “You had to be there”, which ends up maybe making that person feel bad for not having been able to be there, and makes me feel somewhat impotent in my inability to articulate something that’s probably inarticulable. So I wanted to have a show where people could experience some of my work in person, so I could stop attempting to answer questions and simply let the work exist as it’s intended to exist. It would also be a chance to experience the installations collectively and/or simultaneously for the first time. Robert Irwin, describing the effect of seeing a large amount of his paintings exhibited in one place during his first one-man show in 1957, said, “For the first time, I think, I really got a good hard look at what I was doing.”³ The results of this new-found perception weren’t great. He concluded, “I knew that everything I’d been doing wasn’t worth shit.”⁴ With my show, I hoped to get a good hard look at what I was doing, and I hoped that I’d reach a different conclusion than Irwin. Either way, it needed to happen.





4 Which itself was somewhat of a pain in the butt due to paperwork and the lack of availability of gallery space at MassArt. And coordinating basically anything just isn't that much fun.

PRESENTATION

In conceiving the exhibition, the first thing I considered was the amount of physical space I'd have. The Doran Gallery seemed like a good-sized-room (25' x 50', with about 10' ceilings) if I could reserve it and have it to myself. Previous exhibitions there seemed mostly crap because they usually crammed 20+ pieces in the space, and since they were multimedia-type works, the results were cacophonous and spatially stifling. I thought it would be better to take on a more minimalist approach with regard to the amount of work to include in the exhibition. After securing the Doran⁴, I set about sketching possible layouts for the show, which would be called *Ordinary Human Unhappiness*, based on Freud's idea where he was interested in getting people cured of their neuroses to the point that they could experience ordinary human unhappiness, i.e., normal unhappiness, the kind we all deal with at some point, but that's not necessarily pervasive or persistent. With this title as the sort of conceptual beacon, I chose five projects that to some extent fit, in that each of them had an element of sadness or melancholy floating somewhere within them, whether it was obvious upon first perception, or required a longer period of contemplation. On a basic level, all of the pieces included would use projected light as a means of displaying the image, but each piece would have distinct differences in materiality, quality and color of light, physical space and treatment of sound.

I wanted to create a general sequence and flow in which the work could be experienced. I didn't want it to seem like I just dumped a bunch of my stuff in a room. *Here it is, take it or leave it!* Etc. The pieces needed to be installed cleanly, without wires and extension cords everywhere calling attention to the technicality of the presentation.

Because I had done previous installations of some of the work, I already knew a few things about the physicality of some of the work. *You'll Never Untangle the Circumstances That Brought You to This Moment* is an intimate piece that consists of footage of me riding around in the back seat of a car⁵. I knew that I wanted the scale of the projection to likewise be intimate, so I used a short-throw projector positioned on a podium to create the image, and put the audio source (a speaker) behind the podium, facing the wall

5 Itself an enclosed, intimate space.

with the projection, to create a similar effect with the sound. One had to move in close to hear the audio clearly. This seemed like a good introductory piece to the show, so I positioned it to be the first object that you encountered upon entering the room.

I wanted the imagery in *Nightingale* to make a substantial visual impression, which I decided to create using scale. I had the projection be very large and wall-sized, taking up three 4' x 10' glass panels. Also, when looking at the projection (unless you were outside the gallery, peering in the window) it was the only piece that you could see⁶. I positioned a movable wall to the left of the image to create this distinction. The audio played from two speakers set at the width of the image, for optimal perception of the stereo panning effects that I'd added to the music.

Close Your Eyes, Drive As Fast As You Can requires a lot of space, because each panel is about 4' x 8', and the projectors need to be a certain distance away from the screens to create an image that fills the panels. I also wanted to add additional screens to the piece to increase the scale of it and add to the levels of image fragmentation and overlap, which would increase the amount of space needed. The sheer size of the installation meant that it would be the primary or domineering physical presence in the space. This was ok; it would serve as an indirect light source for the rest of the gallery⁷ and hopefully draw the viewer in to experience the piece from a variety of angles and perspectives. Its visual predominance also allowed for the sound to "spill" into the other areas of the gallery without it necessarily seeming obtrusive or unintentional.

Figurants was originally going to be the first piece that you encountered upon entering the gallery. Once installing the show in the space, though, it became clear that the piece should be more contained, and that the experience of interacting with it should have its own semi-separate environment. So, I positioned two of the movable walls up against the windows to create a sort of three-walled room, and pulled the blinds to obscure the glass. I put the mouse to control the piece on a small podium. Containing the piece between the walls blocked ambient light from *Nightingale* and *:29* (both being color pieces), which would have affected the experience. Positioning *Figurants* directly across from *Close Your Eyes, Drive As Fast As You Can*⁸,

6 Whereas with some of the other pieces, you could see others in the foreground or background. I tried to manage this overlap, or lack thereof, as carefully as possible.

7 I wanted it dark, but I didn't want people tripping on stuff.

8 which also consisted of black-and-white projected footage.





however, allowed that project's glow to light the "little room" enough for people to navigate the space.

For :29, the large muslin screen onto which I projected the extreme close-up video loop of Lou, combined with the 27" television screen showing the :29 edit, created a saturated, considerable red glow. The red light, differing in color and luminance from the light from the other projects⁹, cut through the space. I positioned the piece in the back right corner of the gallery, partially obscured by a movable wall, to hopefully seem a bit mysterious and to draw people through the exhibition. I kept the audio confined to headphones because of its repetitive, intense and echo-heavy nature; to have it played through a speaker or speakers would have been too intrusive to the other work¹⁰.

One element of the actual experience of the show that I hadn't necessarily considered extensively before it happened¹¹, was how the space changed when there were actually people in it. Obviously, I knew that people would come to the exhibition. I considered how people would move around the space and see and hear things and so forth. But the presence of people viewing the work and actually moving around the space added another level to the experience, both visually, as people's profiles and silhouettes added an additional perceptible layer to every piece, and experientially, as people's voices and presences drifted in and out of range. People spoke—I didn't realize that people would actually be talking in the space. Part of me wanted to run around the gallery, adjusting the volume to accommodate the fluctuating level of background noise. I was able to resist this urge.

That's basically how the show was designed, from a technical/logistical standpoint. I've described the ways I used light, sound, image and space to create an environment and a curated experience. But that's really only one way of looking at the exhibition. Or maybe I should say that that's really only one level of perception of the show. Where the show really exists, in Bill Viola's previously quoted words, is "in the mind of the viewer."

⁹ three of which were black-and-white.

¹⁰ and most likely annoying to people staying at the show for more than five minutes.

¹¹ At which I found myself surprised and then subsequently shocked at my own surprise.

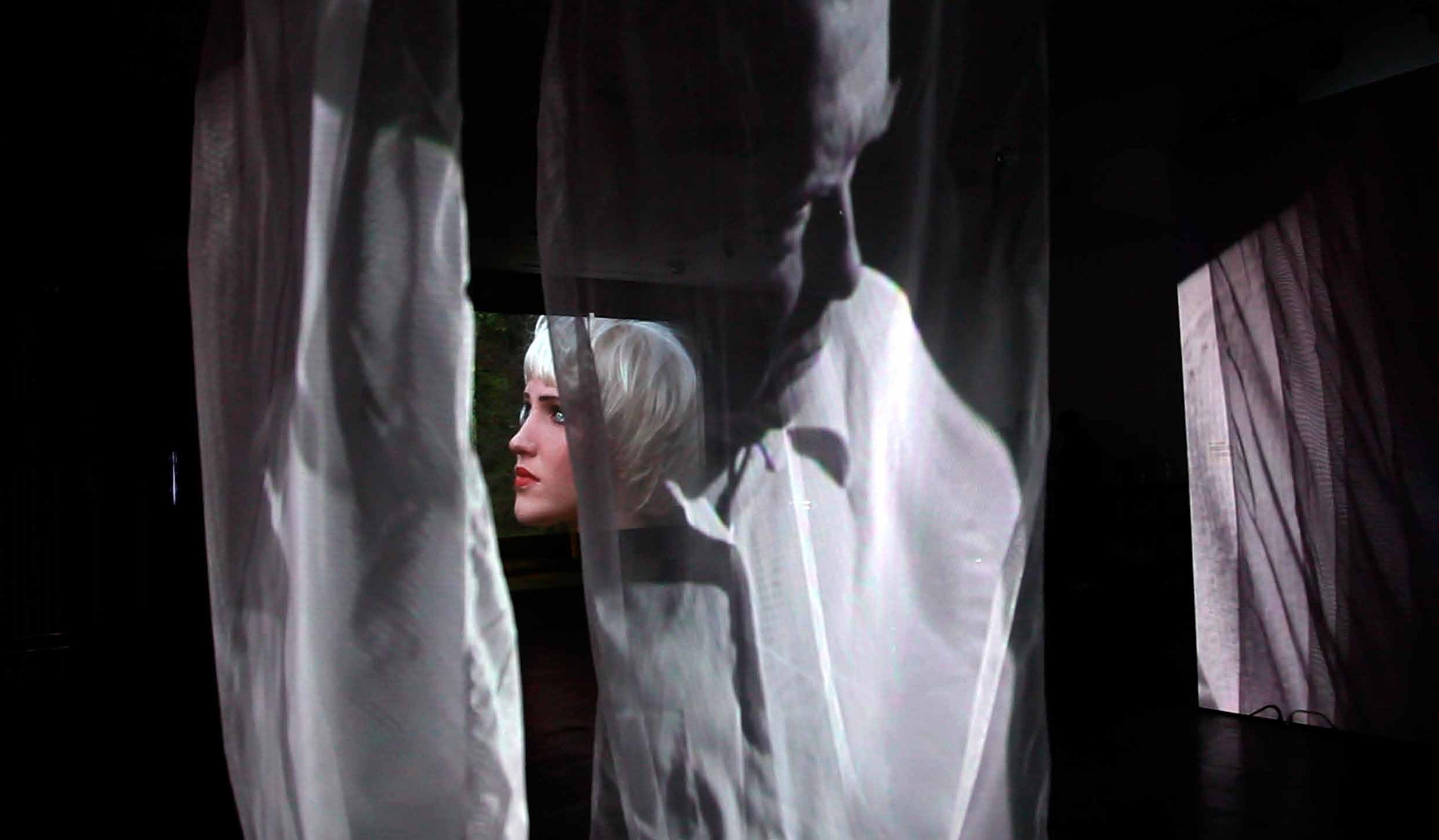
REPRESENTATION

And so I've talked about sight-lines, speaker placement, material transparency, wall proximity, projector distance, the materiality of surfaces, colors of light, and on and on. But why does it feel like I haven't really described what it was like to be in the space and experience the exhibition? It's probably because I've described what was *presented* to the viewer. I mean to say that you can look at *OHU* as a give-and-take between the work and those who were there, perceiving the work. In the preceding section, I've described the work itself, in physical terms: This is what was in the room: Screens, projectors, a television, tracing paper, etc. But what I was really getting at, and what I've been attempting to quantify and decipher and explore with a substantial chunk of my work over the past two years is how it makes you feel and how it makes you feel it.

The relationship between the viewer and the image is an active one. As I alluded to toward the beginning of the book, the time-based image (in the case of *OHU*, we're talking about video) is essentially experienced in the mind of the viewer. There's the image itself, and then there's the image we create of the image. Let's put it this way: in video, the viewer is *presented* with a series of images, and based on their *representation* (i.e., the assemblage of the images in their minds into a story/narrative/*libretto*) the viewer has an emotional response. The emotional response is based on this assemblage, which itself is based on people's own experience, personality, temperament, etc., and which was initiated by the viewing of the video. Again, this is what makes film/video/time-based image work so subjective. People passively view the work, then actively participate in its creation by deciphering or creating its meaning in their minds.

In *OHU*, all of the pieces contained looped video (with each of the loops being about six-minutes-long or less), so viewers were able to experience the work multiple times, even in a semi-short period of time. I'd like to imagine that the viewer's perception changed with each viewing. The first time you see something, you're gathering information. The second time you see it, you're able to compare the information you stored in your first viewing with how you've now *represented* that information, and this









interaction affects your viewing experience. The third time you see it, you're comparing what you're seeing with what you know you saw the first time, with what you saw the second time and assembled based on the first time. And so on. The fact that the video work had a presence in physical space, as an installation, was meant to engage the viewer to want to experience it. Ideally, they'd experience the work multiple times and get past the point of data and image collection, into that quasi-transcendental state, where seeing and experiencing become merged into what seems like something else entirely.

Taking something and removing it from its context, or leaving something intentionally incomplete, invites the viewer/reader/listener to fill in the space. In *OHU*, each piece stops short of entirely spelling out its intentions, instead challenging the viewer/perceiver to complete the narrative/experience/visual jingle in their own minds, through his/her own representation. Mara Wagner, a psychoanalyst with whom I participated in an independent study in the 2011 Spring semester, told me (during one of our highly helpful, decaffeinated-tea-infused meetings) about a *Salem* cigarette ad campaign in the 1970s that featured a jingle that went, "You can take Salem out of the country, but you can't take the country out of Salem." The commercials in the campaign played this little ditty over and over again throughout the spot, until, on the last time through the couplet, the line stopped short, ending on "You can take Salem out of the country, but...". By deliberately leaving the last line off of the jingle (which they'd been pounding into the viewer's brain for the previous thirty seconds), the commercials invited/persuaded the viewer to complete the song in their own minds. This kind of completion forges a stronger connection between the viewer/listener and the content, and potentially a lasting or continuous one. The viewer of the commercial will be singing the jingle to themselves, likely not just once, right after the commercial, but many times. The jingle becomes something that he or she carries around in his or her mind. Conceptually, this is the kind of connection that I'm after with the pieces in *OHU*. I'd like the images and sounds and lighting and color to be things that people carry around with them, absorbed in the experience of the exhibition and lasting in their minds.

Experienced sequentially or collectively, the pieces in *OHU* were supposed to have enough in common, conceptually, formally, and/or narratively that they made sense. I could say that this affinity was because some of them involved deconstructed cinematic narrative conventions, or that they all featured projection, or that they all used the time-based image in physical space, but that would perhaps be beside the point. I can intellectualize the concepts behind the work and explain them to the best of my ability for 32,000 words. I can walk you through the thought process of how the show came together in physical space, through technical consideration and planning, and then through what I think it meant, and how people perceived it. But what I'm really getting at with my work was there in that room, in the particles of dust flickering through projection streams, in light glimpsed around corners and through netted layers, in voices screaming in your ear and speaking softly to you from across the room, through light captured by a lens, converted to ones and zeros and transformed into an image that can maybe make you feel something, as elusive and fleeting and unknowable as any single moment in your life.

